

Teaching Grammar Inductively: Tag Questions

By Judy Sharkey

Teaching grammar doesn't have to be boring for the students or teacher, yet how many moans and groans arise from both when the "g-word" is uttered? With a little creativity, productive lessons that teach grammar inductively can enliven the process for both teachers and students.

I have used the following tag question lesson with high-beginners to low- advanced students in Pakistan, Taiwan, Ecuador and the United States. It has always been a successful and enjoyable classroom experience.

Objective : Students will gain a better understanding of tag questions (this lesson works as an introduction to or a review of tag questions). The students will induce the rules for the structure, produce written examples, understand the importance of intonation when using the structure, and listen for, and orally produce the structure with two different intonation patterns. Students will also learn a new strategy for learning grammar.

Skill areas : listening, speaking, reading, writing.

Materials : a list of six simple sentences written on newsprint, an index card with the same list of sentences, and four or six pieces of 3 in x 5 in paper (copy machine/computer scraps are fine) for each student, six "tags" made of 3 in x 5 in index cards and string. On one side of each tag is a price; on the reverse is a tag question that corresponds to the simple sentences on the newsprint.

Procedure : Before the students enter the classroom, tape the half-dozen tags to various objects in the room (e.g., the window, a desk, the blackboard). Attach the tags so that they are dangling with the price side showing.

When the students enter the class and see the tags, they are naturally curious and initiate the conversation. Thus the lesson starts with the concept of the tags. Guide the conversation a bit to elicit the word "tag" or "price tag," its definition and function. Even though the objects have an intrinsic worth of their own, the price tags attached to them influence our opinion of their value. If a chair has a price tag of \$200, it certainly becomes more than just a chair in our minds. Ask the students their opinions

of the prices: "Do you think this is expensive? cheap?" "How much will you give me?" "Oh, for you a special price," etc.

Now, the students have a concrete concept of a tag. From here move to the topic of tag questions. The students will acquire an image of how the tag is attached to a sentence.

ON NEWSPRINT	ON TAGS	REVERSE SIDE
You're from Quito, _____	aren't you?	\$1.00
Jose isn't here, _____	is he?	\$5.00
They live in Karachi, _____	don't they?	50C
Jamil didn't call you, _____	did he?	\$25.00
We can study together, _____	can't we?	\$300.00
I haven't met your sister, _____	have I?	\$10.00

Using the index card that has the list of sentences, read each one aloud, pausing and then flipping over the appropriate price tag to reveal the tag question. For example, "You're from Quito. . . . (flipping over tag) aren't you?" By the third or fourth one, a student may be able to orally produce the correct tag. Post the newsprint with the list of sentences and tape the appropriate tag next to each one. Let the students silently read the examples. Model the sentences one more time. (I prefer to stand behind the students and read the questions in a calm, gentle tone, letting the information seep in.)

Put the students in groups of three or four and tell them to analyze the examples and write the rules for forming tag questions. One student in each group writes down the information. When the students are ready (10-20 minutes depending on their level and familiarity with this type of activity) ask each group for the rules that they've identified and write them on newsprint, making sure that the class agrees with each one.

Samples : If the sentence is affirmative, the tag is negative. If there's an auxiliary in the sentence, then the auxiliary/modal is in the tag. This newsprint is now a part of the class decor.

The technique of having students induce the rules from example sentences takes a little practice and patience, especially in cultures where students are accustomed to the teacher dispensing the rules. Guide the students as necessary. Ask them to analyze the examples, "What's similar?" "What's different in each?" Tell them to imagine that they are explaining tag questions to a student from another class. With practice, most students do very well inducing grammar rules. It helps them become less dependent on the teacher.

Practice : Staying in groups, each student receives six pieces of 3 in x 5 in paper. Tell them that they are going to write three tag questions on the paper so that on one piece the student writes a simple sentence, on another, s/he writes the appropriate tag.

Example:

This is a great class, isn't it

Within their groups the students check each other's cards to make sure that everyone has followed the directions and that their tag questions are grammatically correct.

One person in each group collects and shuffles the cards. Groups exchange cards so that they do not have the tag questions that they wrote. The groups play "Concentration" or "Memory" with the pieces of paper. (The cards are placed face down in columns. Each player takes a turn flipping over one card and then another trying to find its match. When a match is found, the cards are placed to one side and the player goes again. If a player turns over two cards that do not match, s/he turns them face down again, keeping them in the same position. Then the next player turns over two cards. The player with the most matches wins.) Monitor the groups to insure that they are saying the tag questions and not merely playing silently. When the groups are finished, (time permitting) they can exchange cards and play again.

Intonation : Now move to a discussion on how intonation affects meaning in tag questions: a rising intonation expresses doubt, while a falling intonation signals that the speaker is merely seeking verification. Meaning becomes clearer to the students when the examples are accompanied by appropriate facial gestures.

Practice : Read each tag question from the newsprint, first with a rising intonation and then with a falling. The students must listen for the intonation and signal thumbs up or down accordingly. The students explain the meaning of each question given the difference in intonation.

Once again in groups, the students use their own tag questions (ones from the game or new ones) to practice. Students take turns saying their tag questions and their classmates listen and do thumbs up or down accordingly.

Ask for volunteers to model their tag questions for the entire class.

Homework : Assign a page of controlled exercises. If possible find pictures or cartoons where the students could write mini-dialogues using tag questions with the proper intonation. The mini-dialogues can be performed during the next class and discussed by the class.

Is Teaching Grammar Inductively Effective and/or Appropriate?

I do not advocate using an exclusively inductive approach for teaching grammar, and in fact use a combination of inductive and deductive presentations in my classes. But teaching deductively is fairly straightforward and more widely practiced than teaching inductively. Teachers need more guidance in creating inductive lessons.

In my classes I have found that teaching inductively:

1. addresses learning-style needs of students who work better using an inductive approach;
2. serves as a pre-test to identify what students already know and what they need to practice;
3. gets students more actively involved in the learning process;
4. adds variety to the classroom routine;
5. teaches students to be more independent learners; demonstrates to them that they have knowledge, that they don't need the teacher for all the answers;
6. teaches students a new learning strategy.

Developing students' analytical skills in class may encourage them to take more initiative when encountering English outside of the classroom. Experiencing success with some simple focused examples such as the questions above builds the students' confidence in their ability to be independent learners. Whenever possible and/or appropriate, teachers should bring in examples of real language (newspaper or magazine articles, songs, and advertisements) to be analyzed; they should encourage their students to apply what they've learned in the classroom to new information that they encounter outside.

Judy Sharkey recently spent a year at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras as a USIS English Teaching Fellow. She is currently teaching at Kansia Gaidi University in Japan.

Bibliography

- Larsen-Freeman, Diane. 1991. Teaching Grammar, in Teaching English as a second or foreign language, 2nd ed; ed. Marianne Celce-Murcia. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

- Omaggio, Alice. 1986. Teaching language in context: Proficiency-oriented programs. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.